

W H A T Y O U C A N D O

Both international as well as Congressional efforts in Washington have reached an impasse on the critical task of reducing carbon dioxide emissions in order to prevent overheating the Earth.

However, at its best, America has shown it can demonstrate at the local level the capacity to make urgently needed changes in order to lead us out of this stalemate with bottom up initiatives.

And that opportunity presents itself again for those searching for major actions that they can collectively accomplish as individuals in their community to help avoid crossing irreversible and imminent tipping points in our climate. In this case that is by making small but critical changes in the way we throw out things in our kitchens.

At present, too much of our discards that decompose – primarily our grass, leaves and brush, and food scraps and soiled paper – are buried in landfills. When buried, these organic materials decompose in the absence of oxygen, which generates methane, an extremely aggressive greenhouse gas with 105 times the short-term warming potential of CO₂, according to NASA's latest estimates.

Regrettably, the pollution systems that we use for capturing landfill gases only have the capacity to be installed and to work properly during the limited period of time when relatively little gas is generated. When most of the methane is released, before and afterwards, there is either no gas collection or only marginally effective capture. This means, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, that approximately 80% of this supercharged greenhouse gas escapes into the atmosphere uncontrolled.

Fortunately, there is a solution to this problem and it lies in your hands. Just like we already successfully separate our bottles, cans and newspapers to be recycled, we can also divert our food scraps and soiled paper for composting. This is very similar to what we are currently doing in most parts of the country with our yard trimmings. By diverting these organics, we can eliminate in the first instance the source of methane from our discards.

Already, 121 communities in North America are embarked on this path – 66 in the United States and 55 in Canada – by providing their residents with a third bin for food scraps and soiled paper.

Here's how these programs work. Each household is given a small bucket for their kitchen in which to toss food scraps instead of in a trash can. When that container is full, you taken it to a green cart kept outside, which, each week, is collected at your curb to be taken to a processor where sometimes its energy value is extracted before being made into a nutrient amendment to restore fertility to our depleted soils.

Composting instead of wasting our organic discards can double our diversion rates, which currently in the U.S. are about one-third, to more than two-thirds of what we generate. Composting will also produce four times as many jobs in the local economy than landfilling.

But, most compelling, keeping the discards that decompose out of landfills both reduces the facilities' long term threat of site failures to the environment after they are closed and later abandoned, and also can play a major role in preventing positive feedback loops in the planet's climate from passing early points of no return.

There is nothing more important that each of us can do but to act today, on the 40th anniversary of Earth Day, to help preserve a livable world for our children. To learn how you can encourage your community to set up composting programs for food scraps and soiled paper, go on the web to: _____.